

Great Hikes in Tennessee State Parks:

Three Trails Make One Great Hike at Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park

By Fran Wallas

Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park, located in Shelby County 13 miles north of Memphis near Millington, offers more than 20 miles of hiking trails.

The best way to begin this seven-mile moderate hike is to come the day before and camp in the Dogwood Ridge Campground. If you are lucky, you will find the dogwoods in full bloom. If you are a little late, you will see the petals cover the ground like snow. You can even take a practice three-mile hike on the Woodland Trail loop that starts from Campsite 13.

The Pioneer Springs/Chickasaw Bluff trails begin at the four way stop just as you get to Poplar Lake. The best time to take this popular hike is early in the morning. The hike starts as a woodland hike, but you quickly descend into the different world of a bottomland hardwood forest. You will pass a tree on your right with a large burl that looks like a lion's face or whatever you imagine it to be. In the wetland you can experience cypress knees poking up in the trail. Although you are looking down to avoid tripping over the knees, take time to stop and enjoy the size of the old cypress, sycamore, and cottonwood trees.

In a mile and a half, you get to Pioneer Springs. Even during drought, this spring keeps bubbling up in the

springhouse and spilling under the trail. The water looks very inviting but is not safe to drink.

Now you will be following the white blazes of the Chickasaw Bluff Trail. The trail crosses some deep drainage washes caused by a combination of water and highly erodible soil called loess. This part of the trail is easy and fairly level. A unique part of the trail runs through tall Horsetails.

At a gravel road crossing, you will see a sign to your left that says, "W.T. Shelter .75." What the sign doesn't say is that you will begin a very steep part of the trail that leads back up to the woodlands. Two miles from the spring, you get to the pavement at the top and the shelter.

Walk through the shelter. You are on the red blazed Woodland Trail one-mile loop. Hike down the hill and follow the red blazes to the right when the trail splits off from the Chickasaw Bluff Trail. Cross the narrow land bridge between two washes. Keep looking for a trail going off to the right. If you miss it, as I did, you will get to a well-marked area that says, "Three Mile Loop." Unless you want to add another three miles to your hike, turn back. Look more carefully for the trail you missed. It will be marked "Bike Trail." Follow the trail back to the pavement and hike along the pavement to your



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Cypress knees can be found in the middle of the Pioneer Springs Trail at Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park near Millington.

right. You will see the Chickasaw Bluff Trail wooden sign on your left. Return to Poplar Lake on the same trail. Of course it is never the same. There are always new birdcalls, a turtle or frog, or a huge twin tree that you don't know how you missed.

Directions

Take I-40 to Exit 2-A (Highway 51). Stay on Highway 51 and turn right. At the sixth stoplight turn left on Watkins Road (Highway 388). When the road ends, turn left and go one mile to a four-way stop at the Shelby Forest General Store. Turn right and go one mile. Turn left into the park. If this sounds confusing, just follow the brown state park signs. You can get a trail map and directions to the trailhead at the visitor center.

Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park



(Fran Wallas is an avid hiker. She works as an attorney for the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation in Nashville. You can read about her other Great Hikes in Tennessee State Parks at www.tdec.net/greathikes/.)

Before the climb to the Woodland Trail Shelter, the trail at Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park near Millington winds through Horsetails.



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